

Message Text

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 EB-07

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LAB-04 COME-00 MC-02 /083 W
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FM AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0000B
INFO AMEMBASSY ANKARA
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AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY COPENHAGEN
AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE
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AMEMBASSY OSLO
AMEMBASSY OTTAWA
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY REYKJAVIK
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY DUBLIN
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BRUSSELS 00217

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, PGOV, ECON, BE

SUBJECT: TINEMANS GOVERNMENT MEANDERS OPTIMISTICALLY INTO THE
NEW YEAR

1. SUMMARY: THE DO-LITTLE TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT ENTERS THE
NEW YEAR WITHOUT SERIOUS CHALLENGE AND INCREASINGLY
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CONFIDENT IT WILL SURVIVE AT LEAST UNTIL THE NATIONWIDE

COMMUNAL ELECTIONS IN OCTOBER. TINDEMANS COALITION HAS LITTLE CONCRETE ACHIEVEMENT TO SHOW FOR ITS 20-MONTH STEWARDSHIP. IT COULD BE BROUGHT DOWN IN THE COURSE OF 1976 BY A WORSENING OF BELGIUM'S PERSISTENT ECONOMIC RECESSION OR BY A NOW-UNPREDICTABLE FLAREUP OF THE COMMUNITIES QUESTION. BUT TINDEMANS STRATEGY OF COMPROMISE, ACCOMMODATION AND SMALL SOLUTIONS TO BIG PROBLEMS, WHICH PROVIDES A LITTLE SOMETHING FOR ALMOST EVERYONE, IS CLEARLY MORE IN TUNE WITH THE NATIONAL MOOD THAN THE RADICAL ACTION DEMANDED BY THE OPPOSITION. TINDEMANS PERSONAL POPULARITY IS HIGH AND RISING, AND HIS SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY IS BELGIUM'S MOST EFFICIENT POLITICAL MACHINE, RUNNING ALMOST TOO WELL FOR ITS OWN GOOD. END SUMMARY.

2. THE GOVERNMENT OF LEO TINDEMANS, WHICH GRAPPLED ASTUTELY BUT INDECISIVELY WITH BELGIUM'S ARRAY OF POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS THROUGHOUT 1975, ENTERS THE NEW YEAR MORE CONFIDENT AND LESS THREATENED THAN AT ANY TIME IN ITS 20-MONTH LIFE. BELGIUM'S DO-LITTLE GOVERNING COALITION IS SHOT THROUGH WITH INTERNAL CONTRADICTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY AND INTEREST. NEVERTHELESS, IT HAS AN EXCELLENT CHANCE TO SURVIVE UNTIL THE NATIONWIDE COMMUNAL ELECTIONS IN OCTOBER. ITS OPTIMISTIC LEADERS EXPECT THAT BELGIUM'S CITIZENS WILL THEN ACCORD THE TINDEMANS STEWARDSHIP A SOLID (IF INDIRECT) VOTE OF CONFIDENCE. WILFRIED MARTENS, THE EBULLIENT PRESIDENT OF THE FLEMISH SOCIAL CHRISTIAN PARTY (CVP), SEES NO REASON WHY THE GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT SURVIVE THEN UNTIL THE NEXT SCHEDULED NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN SPRING, 1978.

3. DISPASSIONATE OBSERVERS, NOT TO MENTION TINDEMANS' POLITICAL ADVERSARIES, HAVE NO DIFFICULTY FINDING COGENT REASONS TO CHALLENGE CVP OPTIMISM. BELGIUM HAS NOT YET BOTTOMED OUT IN THE ECONOMIC RECESSION IT HAS BEEN SUFFERING THROUGH WITH THE REST OF WESTERN EUROPE. THE TINDEMANS' ECONOMIC-RECOVERY PROGRAM, STILL NOT ENACTED FOUR MONTHS AFTER IT WAS ANNOUNCED, HAS BEEN SO DILUTED BY POLITICAL ACCOMMODATIONS THAT

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IT IS UNLIKELY TO HAVE MUCH EFFECT ON THE ECONOMY AT ALL. UNEMPLOYMENT IS NOW AT 8.4 PERCENT OF THE WORK FORCE, A SHOCKINGLY HIGH FIGURE FOR POSTWAR BELGIUM, AND STILL RISING. IF THE SLUMP PERSISTS THROUGH THE FIRST HALF OF THE YEAR, TENSIONS WITHIN THE TINDEMANS COALITION, WHICH SPANS THE FIELD OF ECONOMIC INTERESTS FROM ORGANIZED LABOR TO BIG BUSINESS, COULD OVERWHELM THE PRIME MINISTER'S

A-LITTLE-FOR-EVERYBODY STRATEGY. A SECOND AREA OF POTENTIAL POLITICAL INSTABILITY IS THE COMMUNITIES QUESTION, NO CLOSER TO AN AGREED SOLUTION THAN WHEN TINDEMANS TOOK OFFICE. MOST BELGIANS ARE CONTENT TO LET THE ISSUE LIE DORMANT FOR THE TIME BEING. BUT THERE ARE FLEMISH AND FRANCOPHONE MILITANTSEAGER TO FIRE UP LATENT EMOTIONS. FROM TIME TO TIME THEY COME UPON AN EXPLOITABLE SITUATION, SUCH AS THE 1975 F-16 REPLACEMENT DECISION WHICH BECAME A FRANCOPHONE-FLEMISH CONFRONTATION THAT SHOOK THE TINDEMANS GOVERNMENT. IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN-UNPREDICTABLY. TWO FOREIGN-POLICY QUESTIONS ON THE 1976 AGENDA ARE SUSCEPTIBLE TO SUCH EXPLOITATION: PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL OF THE IEA AGREEMENT AND OF A WATERWAYS DEVELOPMENT TREATY WITH THE NETHERLANDS BOTH OPPOSED BY WALLON NATIONALISTS. (THE NETHERLANDS TREATY IS THE MORE EXPLOSIVE, BUT THE GOVERNMENT CAN POSTPONE A SHOWDOWN.)

4. ALL THIS BEING SAID, PERSONALITY REMAINS MORE IMPORTANT THAN POLICY IN SHAPING THE COURSE OF BELGIAN POLITY A MAJOR FACTOR IN THE CURRENT POLITICAL EQUATION IS THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN AND SOCIALIST PARTY LEADERS WHICH ATTENDED THE COLLAPSE OF THE LEBURTON GOVERNMENT IN 1974. PERSONAL ANIMUS INTERFERES WITH A RESUMPTION OF DIALOGUE BETWEEN THESE TWO OLD PARTNERS IN GOVERNMENT AND TENDS TO CAST THE POLITICAL PROCESS INTO A RIGID MOLD OF GOVERNMENT-OPPOSITION CONFRONTATION. SINCE THE ARITHMETIC IS ON THE GOVERNMENT'S SIDE, THE SOCIALISTS ARE FOR THE MOMENT VIRTUALLY POWERLESS TO AFFECT NATIONAL POLITICAL DECISIONS. COALITION LEADERS HAVE TAKEN TO RAMMING THROUGH MAJOR LEGISLATION

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TION BY AUTOMATIC MAJORITY, REJECTING ANY AND ALL AMENDMENTS. (TINDEMANS' HORSE-TRADING TO GET A PASSABLE ECONOMIC RECOVERY BILL HAS BEEN PRIMARILY CONDUCTED WITH INTERESTS REPRESENTED IN HIS COALITION, NOT WITH THE OPPOSITION).

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 BRUSSELS 00217

4. IN ANOTHER WAY THE PERSONAL FACTOR IN BELGIAN
POLITICS WILL WORK T THE GOVERNMENT'S ADVANTAGE IN
THE COMING MONTHS. THE ONE SOLID AND IRREVOCABLE
ACCOMPLISHMENT OF THE TINDEMANS COALITION IN 1975
WAS ENACTMENT OF A LAW REDUCING THE NUMBER OF COMMUNES,
BELGIUM'S BASIC GOVERNING UNIT, FROM 2,359 TO 590.
THE NEW POLITICAL MAP OF BELGIUM, INVOLVING HUNDREDS
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OF FUSIONS OF NEIGHBORING MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS,
MUST BE OPERATIVE FOR THE OCTOBER COMMUNAL ELECTIONS.
THOUSANDS OF LOCAL POLITICIANS AND CIVIL SERVANTS
WILL LOSE THEIR JOBS. THE LAW DOES NOT SPECIFY WHICH

MAOYORS AND WHICH ALDERMEN WILL BE TURNED OUT. THE SELECTION-OUT WILL OCCUR IN THOUSANDS OF SMOKE -FILLED ROOMS WHERE BETWEEN NOW AND OCTOBER POLITICIANS WILL NEGOTIATE TRADE-OFFS IN JOBS, PATRONAGE AND LOCAL PARTY COALITIONS. THE PROCESS WILL ABSORB THE NERGIES OF THE COUNTRY'S POLITICAL PARTIES. SINCE THE FUSION LAW WIPES OUT THE TRADITIONAL YARDSTICKS BY WHICH LOCAL POLITICS HAVE BEEN MEASURED, ALL PARTIES ARE VENTURING INTO THE UNKNOWN. THE MANNER IN WHICH THE NEW PLLITICAL FOUNDATION IS LAID WILL HAVE LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES FOR BELGIAN POLITICS. UNLESS GRAVE NATIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL ISSUES INTERVENE, THEN, THE COMMUNE WILL BE THE LOCUS OF SIGNIFICANT POLITICAL ACTION IN BELGIUM IN 1976. WHILE THE DECISION-MAKING WILL BE LOCAL AND IN MANY CASES INEXPLICABLE TO ANYONE NOT BORN IN THE TOWN, THE POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE OF THE COUNTRY AS A WHOLE WILL AFFECT THE OVERALL OUTCOME. AS 1976 BEGINS, THESE CONTEMPORARY PHENOMENA LOOM LARGE ON THE BELGIAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE:

5. THE RISING STAR OF LEO TINDEMANS. IN HIS FIRST TRY AT HEADING A BELGIAN GOVERNMENT TINDEMANS HAS HAD A RESOUNDING PERSONAL SUCCESS. THE POLLS RANK HIM AS THE MOST POPULAR POLITICIAN IN THE COUNTRY BY FAR. HIS POPULARITY CURVE IS STILL RISING. AS PRIME MINISTER, HE HAS SHOWN HIMSELF EXCEPTIONALLY ADEPT AT THE ESOTERIC ARTS OF POLITICKING BELGIAN STYLE. HIS MINISTRY HAS BEEN A CONTINUOUS EXERCISE IN PIECING TOGETHER A COMPROMISE, PLACATING A DISAPPOINTED FACTION, CREATING A CONSENSUS. HOWEVER EPHEMERAL, WHICH WILL GET THE COUNTRY THROUGH THE DAY, THE WEEK OR THE MONTH. HE MAKES NO IRRECONCILABLE ENEMIES AND WEARS HIS DISTINCTION MODESTLY. EC'S "WISE MAN", HE GIVES BELGIUM RESPECTED REPRESENTATION ON HIGH INTERNATIONAL COUNCILS. HISTORY MAY EVENTUALLY RANK TINDEMANS AS A STATESMAN AS WELL AS A HARD-SCRAMBLING POLITICIAN. RIGHT NOW HE IS A WINNER. IF HIS GOVERNMENT SHOULD FALL
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THIS YEAR, HE WOULD ALMOST CERTAINLY BE NAMED FORMATEUR OF A SUCCESSOR.

6. THE CONTINUING DISARRAY OF THE BELGIAN SOCIALIST PARTY. PSB, ONE OF BELGIUM'S TWO MASS POLITICAL PARTIES (30 PERCENT OF SEATS IN PARLIAMENT) WAS TURNED OUT OF THE GOVERNMENT JUST TWO YEARS AGO AND IS STILL TRYING TO FIND ITS FEET. IN THE GENERATION CHANGE WHICH FOLLOWED THE FALL OF THE LEBURTON GOVERNMENT THE PARTY MOVED LEFTWARD. ITS CLARION CALL THROUGHOUT 1975 WAS FOR RADICAL RE-STRUCTURING OF BELGIAN ECONOMY AND SOCIETY AS THE

ANSWER TO THE "CRISIS" NOW GRIPPING THE NATION. BELGIANS AS A WHOLE SHOWED NO STOMACH FOR SUCH STRONG MEDICINE. THE TINDEMANS THERAPY- MUDDLE THROUGH AND HOPE FOR BETTER TIMES- WAS MORE IN HARMONY WITH THE NATIONAL MOOD. MEANWHILE , THE PSB ITSELF HAD TROUBLE AGREEING ON ITS GOALS. SUCH PRAGMATISTS AS LEBURTON AND HENRI SIMONET, MINDFUL OF THE PRESTIGE AND PATRONAGE THAT GOES WITH IT, OPENLY URGED A RETURN TO THE GOVERNMENT- EVEN AS CVP'S JUNIOR PARTNER. THE IDEOLOGUES- MOSTLY YOUNG AND RRENCH-SPEAKING- INSISTED ON HEWING TO SPARTAN PRINCIPLE. SOCIALISTS LIKE GUY SPITAEELS AND JEAN-MAURICE DEHOUSSE EXERCISE THE SHARPEST TONGUES AND MOST ELEGANT INTELLECTS IN BELGIAN POLITICS. THEY COST TINDEMANS AND MARTENS NO SLEEP.

7. THE GROWING STRENGTH OF THE " FLEMISH MAFIA". THE CENTER OF GRAVITY IN BELGIUM NOW LIES IN FLANDERS. NEARLY 60 PERCENT OF BELGIANS COUNT THEMSELVES FLEMINGS, AND THE DYNAMISM AND WEALTH-PRODUCING RESOURCES OF THE COUNTRY ARE INCREASINGLY CONCENTRATED IN THE NORTHERN HALF OF THE COUNTRY. THE CVP, A BROADLY BASED PARTY, MODERN, WELL-FINANCED, WELL-ORGANIZED, PROVIDES EFFECTIVE POLITICAL EXPRESSION FOR THE NEW FLANDERS. ALTHOUGH IT HOLDS ONLY ONE-QUARTER OF THE SEATS IN PARLIAMENT, IT CALLS THE CADENCE IN BELGIAN POLITICS. ITS CRITICS - AND THSE INCLUDE SOME IN CVP'S SISTER FRANCOPHONE PARTY , PSC - HAVE TAKEN TO MUTTERING DARKLY ABOUT "THE CVP STATE". THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE " HEAVY" PERSONALITIES IN BRUSSELS TODAY ARE NEARLY ALL CVP MEN - NOTABLY, BESIDES TINDEMANS AND MARTENS, CONFIDENTIAL

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HEALTH MINISTER DE SAEGER, COMMUNICATIONS MINISTER CHABERT AND JEF HOUTHUYS, PRESIDENT OF THE CHRISTIAN TRADE UNION FEDERATION, CSC. ALL BUT HOUTHUYS STAND AT THE CONSERVATIVE END OF THE SOCIAL CHRISTIAN SPECTRUM. MARTENS, YOUNG AND AGREESSIVE , IS EAGER TO EXTEND AND BROADEN CVP HEGEMONY. THAT OUTSPOKEN AMBITION COULD CAUSE TOUBLE FOR CVP IN THE END. MARTENS AND HIS COHORTS ARE BEING FAULTED EVEN BY THEIR WELL-WISHERS FOR UN-BELGIAN RUTHLESSNESS IN ORGANIZING THOSE MACHINE-LIKE VICTORIES IN PARLIAMENT. BELGIANS, UNLIKE THEIR NEIGHBORS TO THE SOUTH, HAVE NO TASTE FOR PRINCELY LEADERS OR ONE-PARTY GOVERNMENT-PARTICULARLY IF THAT PARTY WERE MARKED WITH A RIGHTIST LABEL. CAVEAT DUX. FIRESTONE

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